

Building a Class Library Using Local Folktales

By Grace J. Malgwi

The shortage of reading materials in Nigerian schools has contributed in no small way to the poor standard of English in schools. The lack of a reading culture among parents also compounds the problem, as most children come from homes with little or no reading materials. This article describes a way that learners can produce their own reading materials.

These materials, however, should be seen only as by-products since the learning that takes place in the process of doing the task is more valuable. The technique is not entirely new, as a programme based on similar activities has been tried out in Thailand, Bangladesh, and India (Walker, Rattavich, and Oller, 1992).

Classroom Procedure

The teacher divides the class into small groups of five or six, depending upon the size of the class. The teacher should note, however, that the smaller the group, the more effective the monitoring, since the activities the learners do require discussions that can become disruptive if the groups are too large.

Stage 1

The learners tell each other folktales that they know. Teachers should ensure that the folktales are being told in English and should circulate in the class to assist with difficult vocabulary. It is not important if not all members of a group have a tale to tell. Two or three stories in each group are enough.

Stage 2

At this stage, the learners in each group discuss the stories and decide which one they would like to write. Then, with the help of the teacher, learners produce a written draft of their folktales. Each group will write one story.

Stage 3

This stage requires the guidance of the teacher as the learners work to produce a clean copy of their stories. The technicalities of story writing such as paragraphing, using quotation marks for direct speech, and indenting for direct speech and songs are explained in this stage. Teachers can avoid lengthy explanations if they show learners storybooks that include direct speech, pictures, and other relevant layout styles that students can incorporate in their "books." During this task learners can add illustrations.

Stage 4

Each group then produces a final copy with relevant drawings added. To make the end-product more booklike, cardboard can be made into colorful covers for the stories. Each group can then staple its story together. The teacher can display the stories and encourage learners to borrow and read stories written by other groups.

Pedagogic Rationale

The activities described here require that learners do more than just write. Learners must interact and cooperate as they work toward completing the task. This is important in language learning because the learners are involved in "comprehending, manipulating, producing, and interacting in the target language (TL), while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan 1989).

Apart from interacting in the TL, the learners also draw upon their resources from such areas of language as grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and reading, and nonlinguistic resources such as drawing and designing. Norman, Levihn, and Hedenquist (1986) stress the importance of engaging as many senses as possible in learning activities because such activities stimulate both hemispheres of the brain, thus resulting in better learning.

Another important factor in the teaching procedure described is the functional value of the reader. The fact that the learners know that something tangible is being produced from a learning task serves as a very strong motivating factor. This supports Pincas's (1982) belief that for all levels of learners, motivation is increased if writing is placed in a realistic context. Teaching that quotation marks in direct speech are started on a new line and that the sentence is indented would be boring and very technical when presented in a grammar lesson. However, within the context of folktales, where the hare speaks and the lion responds, learning becomes enjoyable. Finally, having learners work in small groups, rather than having each learner write his/her own folktale, involves students in communication, thereby enhancing the quality of language being used (Brumfit 1984).

Suggestions

Teachers wishing to use this technique in their classes should decide which stages to include in a particular lesson. Breaking up the process into a two-day activity of about one hour each day is quite effective with elementary school pupils. Stages 1 and 2 can be done in a double English period of 30 minutes each, while stages 3 and 4 can be done the following day in another double period.

Whatever type of lesson schedule, teachers can organize the activities so that learners can easily resume the task.

Conclusion

The present economic hardship facing most developing nations has resulted in the lack of basic teaching and learning materials; thus, there is a need for teachers to be more innovative in their teaching and embrace techniques that will help them make the most of their teaching

circumstances. By doing this activity twice a term, teachers can build up a considerable number of simple reading books for their classes. Fun and competition can be added if teachers cooperate and exchange stories with those written in other classes.

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